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Turning Around a Struggling Team Culture: A Guide

At some point in our careers, we may encounter a situation where our team is not functioning effectively, or they struggle to collaborate with other teams or organizations. Often, this problem arises from a lack of a collaborative culture or an absence of one altogether. The purpose of this article is to provide tips on how to manage the process of turning around a company culture that is struggling or possibly nonexistent, as well as insights on leadership to reinvigorate or instill a culture of collaboration.

The role of Leadership in Effecting a Culture Change

Successfully turning around a company culture requires strong leadership. If the turnaround does not begin with the top leadership, it is unlikely to take hold. Effective leadership in such situations is crucial for the turnaround's viability and sustainability. A successful culture turnaround aimed at improving team effectiveness and the team's relationships may involve various actions, such as changing leadership, reconfiguring staff roles, revamping processes, or improving communication channels. Regardless of the specific solutions chosen, they all require initiative from a leader, whether it be at the top or in the middle levels of management.

If you are a leader who has recognized the need for a cultural turnaround, prepare yourself for a challenge that will test your patience and perseverance. Changing a culture means confronting an established and entrenched system of shared beliefs, customs, and practices within a group or community. This task can be demanding, as it often requires significant effort to shift mindsets.

Turning around any situation—whether a financially struggling company or an organization facing poor internal collaboration—can be daunting. As the saying goes, "You can't make a massive ship turn on a dime." It takes a lot of room and time for that ship to make its turn. Just like a large ship needs time and space to change course, so too does a team require time to change its course and adjust its culture of collaboration. This effort can be a true test of anyone's patience.

Understanding Culture in Turnaround Efforts

A culture turnaround is particularly a tough task to deal with because as Dan Oblinger said in his book *Life or Death Listening*, "Culture is a beast. Culture devours everything." One could say culture is at the top of the food chain when you compare it to the importance of trust, execution, strategy, tactics or whatever else. Turning around or changing a culture is a challenging task because culture is what

happens beyond what is written down in any manuals or rule books. It's the shared beliefs, customs, practices that are engrained in a group or community. Culture is where group norms and ways of conduct exist and thrive, good or bad, and will dictate oftentimes what a person does within a group.

To effectively implement a sustainable turnaround for your team when you are experiencing an unhealthy team or group culture that needs course correcting, I will provide two action item lists categorized into Leadership and Communication/Setting Direction. The following is not meant to be an exhaustive discussion for each item but rather an overview to give a framework for initiating and setting your direction on a culture turnaround effort. Each item will be explored in greater depth in future articles about collaboration and teamwork.

Leadership Aspects:

As I mentioned above, providing the right leadership is paramount to making any team culture turnaround take hold. The following are key items to help a manager or leader setting out on such a task:

1. **Manage the line:** As a leader, it is essential to understand your team members—how they work, their personalities, and their interactions with one another. However, leaders should avoid crossing the line into becoming too friendly with team members. If a leader becomes too close, it may hinder their ability to make necessary changes or impact their judgment in challenging situations. It's important to build strong relationships while maintaining professional boundaries.
2. **A leader sets the tone:** A leader must establish a positive tone and exude confidence during a turnaround. This involves demonstrating a clear understanding of the direction the team needs to take and that things are going to work out. If a team does not receive support from top leadership, any cultural turnaround is likely to fail.
3. **Hold Team members accountable, better yet inspire “taking” responsibility:** Accountability is a form of motivation in persuading others to take action to do what needs to get done. Motivation is good but it doesn't make change stick permanently. Motivation is related to an external force that usually comes with a consequence, good or bad and analogous to the “carrot or stick”. A better tact, however, is to inspire the value of “taking” responsibility. I emphasize the word “taking”, because it invokes a voluntary internal ownership of a task or responsibility, whereas the word accountability often implies an obligation imposed on someone, lacking the voluntary willingness and ownership to embrace the task at hand. Inspiring others gets at the heart of a human being which makes the chance of permanent change increase dramatically.
4. **Demonstrate belief in Your team:** As the leader, you need to establish a firm belief in your team by showing them that you have confidence in their abilities to do what needs to be done. Showing confidence in your team is crucial in giving your team the encouragement they need to work through whatever problems, issues, or even a major culture change. If you're going through a culture change to make the team work better, I can't stress enough how important it is as a leader to show you believe and have confidence in your team and that they can overcome any problem.
5. **Meet your team or organization on their turf:** During a culture shift it's crucial to maintain some form of stability as the leader to navigate what can be stormy waters in implementing a turnaround. If team members feel uncertainty and doubt about the direction the team is headed in, it can be a serious detractor in keeping the team focused on doing their work through this time frame.

Communication / Setting Direction:

It's critical for a leader to always know what direction the team is headed in and to portray that confidence in that direction and communicate it to the team, otherwise, any such effort in turning around a team culture will flounder.

1. **Change Your Thinking:** Albert Einstein said, “We cannot solve our problems with the same thinking we used when we created them.” This is more a reminder that we have a human tendency

to use the same logic to fix a problem that may have used to create the problem in the first place. That said, a leader is going to have to change or tweak something because looking at a problem from the same perspective will just lead a leader back to where they were in the first place. My point is to make sure you are looking at a problem from a different perspective.

2. **Ask questions with the goal of understanding what's working and what's not working:** Interview, probe, dig for answers to find out the "why" of the issues at hand. One shows their leadership abilities in this effort by the quality of the questions they ask. This is one of the most powerful tools a leader has in their leadership arsenal when engaged in a turnaround effort.
3. **Active Listening:** Your team wants to be heard, and generally wants to give input. A leader absolutely needs to foster that environment where team members feel they can readily admit a mistake or offer up new ideas. A team or organization can sometimes be off balance when undergoing a turnaround effort and can profoundly affect team member's thinking and mental state in a negative manner. In a volatile environment such as a team culture turnaround, a leader can have a profound influence in a positive way by actively listening to their team. Your team is your "boots on the ground" which is another way of saying, they are the nearest to the action and know and have a better feel and understanding of what's going on which can provide vital information a team leader should know in assessing the current situation and planning next moves.
4. **Reset goals/objectives:** Define the overarching goal or objective for the turnaround effort. If the turnaround effort aims to serve as a course correction to foster a culture of collaboration, or what I refer to as a "Mission First" culture, for a group that is struggling with its team dynamics, then it is essential to establish definitive goals and objectives; if such goals already exist, they may need to be reevaluated and reset. As an example, turning around a culture can be a challenging and perhaps nebulous task. Make goals and objectives as tangible and measurable as much as possible. Examples include setting goals related to information flow timelines, increased number of decisions made at leadership levels closest to the work, reduced time in making decisions, and number of "open issues" open longer than an agreed upon threshold. These are just some examples in figuring out ways to measure progress towards turning around a struggling culture of collaboration.
5. **Open up communication channels:** This principle should go without saying but nonetheless, it needs to be said. I have three things to say about this item:
 - a. A team, no matter what the setting is, can never do enough talking. If one has ever watched successful sports teams, one of the most prominent factors in their success is they are always communicating on what's happening, who's doing what and when on the field or court.
 - b. Maintaining free flowing information is vital to success anywhere whether it be simple verbal communication or timely processing of paperwork or approvals, etc.
 - c. A leader in a turnaround effort needs to ensure the right people or groups are talking with each other. This item can be overlooked because it is easy to assume the right groups or team members are talking with each other and that such discussions are going smoothly as well. This single assumption can be extremely detrimental to the health of any team, group or organization.
6. **Inspiration, not Motivation:** If a culture change or turnaround of any kind is going to last, a leader must dig deeper beyond externally motivating a team or organization with good or bad consequences. That's the easier and quickest way to effect a change but least likely to be sustainable. External motivation can be useful, but not for permanent change. To effectively turnaround a culture, a leader needs to turn to inspiration. To make change stick, a leader must find a way to get at the heart and know how to inspire a team or organization to change. When humans change for the long term, it usually is a result of some kind of inspiration that "tugs at the heart strings", not motivation.
7. **One cannot change the past, start from where you are at:** Sometimes we try to change the past when dealing with a problem. One can't change the past. You simply need to move forward. One

moment in the history of World War 2 always serves as an example to me to always be moving forward. There will be many times where you will be stuck between the waters of the English Channel and the blazing gunfire of the German Army as was Teddy Roosevelt, Jr.'s 4th infantry division was on Utah Beach on D-Day, June 6th, 1944. Upon discovering his division had landed over one mile off course and in front of more heavily defended beaches, he knew there was no turning back. Only one decision could be made: Move forward. That is when Teddy Roosevelt, Jr. famously said, "We'll start the war from right here." knowing full well there was no changing the circumstances that befell them. They could not retreat into the waters of the English Channel, nor could they get to their planned landing zone. They could only move forward. Once you embrace this principle, it helps bring more clarity and definition to the problem and how to move forward.

Changing a culture means not motivating but inspiring. Motivating change is temporary and involves some kind of consequence, positive or negative. Whereas inspiration relates to emotion which tugs at the heartstrings and the gut. To inspire lasting change a leader needs to make the change a heart issue and not a mind issue and that to create a culture of collaboration or "Mission First" culture, a leader needs to inspire that working as a team is something bigger than just having built your project or completed your task, but rather to create a culture that has produced relationships that outlast the life of any project.